

Beyond the Blocks

Bethel Heights, like most vineyards, is laid out in a series of rectangular shapes, or “blocks.” We began designating wines from some of our single blocks in 1991, both for exceptional quality and for the distinct differences they showed from one another. The distinct personalities of the Flat Block, the Southeast Block, and the West Block, are deeply woven into the fabric of Bethel Heights’ history; it would be impossible to tell that history without them.

Then, with the passage of time, other patterns began to emerge, first in our Pinot noir and then in our Chardonnay. Our oldest Chardonnay, the own-rooted Wente clone vines planted in 1977, trained on the old “California sprawl” high wire trellis system, were a source of much disappointment in the early years, always ripening too late with searing acidity that had to be balanced out with fruit from other parts of the vineyard. Having stubbornly survived a failed attempt to graft them over to another clone, these vines reached full maturity in relative obscurity, until a string of unusually warm vintages finally showed us the possibility that they could become something extraordinary. Since 2014 The High Wire has been bottled as a stand-alone wine.

THE 2019 VINTAGE: In contrast to the previous five vintages which were all dry and quite warm, 2019 started with cool, moist weather in the Spring that persisted into early summer. The crop was small, with small berries and lots of intensity. The cool season allowed us to outperform on “hang time” (the time from bloom to harvest). Instead of the normal 100 days, we were able to leave the fruit on the vines for 110 to 120 days without excess sugar accumulation, giving us enhanced depth and complexity. The 2019 vintage wines will take some time to settle in, as with most cooler vintages.



2019 CHARDONNAY *The High Wire*

Harvest date: October 6, 2019

Fruit source: Own-rooted Wente clone planted 1977

Grapes at harvest: Brix: 20.5, pH: 3.12, TA: 9.1 g/L

Finished wine: Alcohol 12.8 %, pH 3.24, TA 7.7 g/L

Barrel aged 12 months in French oak, 30% new barrels, and 4 months in stainless steel

58 cases bottled unfinned on February 23, 2021

VINIFICATION: The grapes were whole cluster pressed under a blanket of carbon dioxide and the juice settled cold for 72 hours before being racked to barrels. The new wine completed alcoholic fermentation in a month, underwent full malolactic fermentation in the Spring, and spent 12 months in barrel prior to racking to stainless steel drums for an additional 4 months before bottling.

WINEMAKER NOTES: The Wente Chardonnay has produced some of our most detailed and compelling wines in recent years, a departure from its youth when it struggled to achieve ripeness. In a cool year like 2019 we knew it would be a challenge, so the crop was dramatically thinned and we allowed the wine to cellar longer than usual before bottling to bring texture and depth to the wine.

When to drink it? The 2019 High Wire is going to require some patience. This wine is a coiled ball of nerves on release and I believe will benefit significantly from at least 5 years of cellaring. I suspect the best results will come by 2030 and beyond.